

Bruce D. Marshall and Realism

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There are several theologians who suppose that Christian theology inevitably entails realism, concerning both God, mundane, and common-sense objects. Such an assumption has sometimes led to the privileging of a particular form of realism, awarding it a license to set the ontological stage for theological work. Theology has thus begun to accept theories of truth, reference and reality as necessary *prolegomena*. Such a disposition is increasingly challenged today, from several quite distinct quarters.¹ A consensus is beginning to emerge uniting postliberals, Radically Orthodox theologians and Evangelicals, which holds that any philosophical theory employed by theologians must be subordinated to the material content of theology. Should such ‘alien’ discourses be found wanting in relation to Christian truth, they should be revised or abandoned. As an example of such a theory conceived independently of theology, realism itself has to be used as a merely formal device when appropriate to the task of dogmatics.

The present article critically discusses the proposal of *Trinity and Truth* with respect to a theory of truth and how this correlates with the traditional demands of realism. The first two sections are largely descriptive, while sections III and IV critically assess Marshall’s proposal. Section I introduces Marshall’s attempt to follow Davidson beyond the dispute between realism and anti-realism. Central to such an attempt is the abandonment of the notion of epistemic intermediaries. With these gone, traditional correspondence theories of truth are in trouble. I shall ask, what sense does it make still to speak of thoughts being in touch with the world without ‘correspondence’? Marshall believes we are entitled to this kind of talk since our thoughts are in *causal* relation to the world. Doing away with intermediaries means that truth has to be treated as a basic notion and that we should be disquotational about it. Marshall, however, only follows Davidson up to a point. While he believes that the latter has provided us with a workable account of how truth works in mundane reality, a theological modification of this account is necessary. The main reason, briefly, is that on a theological account truth cannot be *automatic*, that is,

1. To name but a few: Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); John Milbank with Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999); and most of his colleagues in the Radical Orthodoxy group, Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology. Volume 2: Reality* (New York: Continuum, 2002); Stanley Grenz with John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); F. LeRon Schults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

it cannot simply depend upon the meaning of a sentence and the arrangement of the world. Theological reflection about the truth that is Jesus Christ shows that part of the content of the notion of truth is the fact that the Trinity must cause a sentence to be true. The following two sections discuss these proposals. I argue (section III) that his ‘automaticity argument’ fails on both theological and philosophical grounds. Next (section IV), I show that Marshall inherits certain holistic strictures about causality and that this renders his theological modification unworkable. Section V offers a summary and conclusion.

I

Marshall is not interested in realism for its own sake. He shares a common concern with a number of contemporary philosophical theologians, namely to use philosophy, including ontology, epistemology and other branches, as disciplines ancillary to theology. The latter is to carry on a critical dialogue with these discourses without, however, treating them as epistemically primary.² This means that should a philosophical account of truth, morality, or meaning, be in contradiction with Christian belief, these would be “annihilated,” in the words of Donald MacKinnon.³ The basic idea is that philosophical theories should be used as instruments for bringing out the meaning of the Christian Gospel.⁴ There should be no interest in these alien theories except insofar as they function as enhancers of Christian truth.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Marshall has no particular investment in a realist theory of truth. Inasmuch as realism can fruitfully be brought to bear on the question of Christian teachings, it is worth discussing. Should it get in the way of extracting a specifically Christian account of truth and knowledge, it will be abandoned without hesitation.⁵

As it happens, Marshall is not very convinced that realism as a philosophical theory about truth, at least in the version which employs a correspondence theory, fares very well on the contemporary scene. There are purely philosophical reasons for which he is suspicious of correspondence realism. There are a variety of realisms and a correspondence theory of truth

2. These theologians usually regard Hans Frei as giving the best description of this *ad hoc* relationship between theology and philosophy. See Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), 70–91.

3. Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 242.

4. See for example Hans Frei’s use of formal literary devices as instruments that reveal the identity of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, in *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), x–xiv, 1–12, 86–154.

5. It should be pointed out that this ‘ancillary’ approach to realism is also shared by McGrath. Although he lacks the biblical elaboration of the concept of truth present in Marshall, he shares with the latter an emphasis on preventing ‘realism’ from setting the agenda for theology. He is, however, more optimistic about the promise realism still has as a scientific theory.

need not figure in all of them. In fact, as Peter Byrne points out,⁶ correspondence is assumed by otherwise idealist theories of truth and knowledge. In such theories, the right side of the correspondence relation describes the facts about sense perception, rather than facts about the world. Precisely for reasons such as these it is necessary to discuss not whether theology entails realism, but precisely what kind of theory of truth, or what kind of realism or non-realism it entails.

Marshall's approach to the dispute over correspondence theories of truth betrays his holistic approach to epistemology. One important issue has to do with the notion of mental intermediaries between beliefs and the world. He finds this problem exemplified in Thomas Aquinas. Although Aquinas cannot be accused of introducing third parties between human mind and world, his idea of correspondence understood as isomorphism between mind and reality still presupposes the notion of forms. This largely Aristotelian notion, Marshall fears, has outrun its usefulness and rather than helping Aquinas in his project, it more than often gets in the way. Upon clarifying his take on Aquinas, following criticism by Fergus Kerr, Marshall points out that it is not a question of whether Aquinas is a direct realist or not. He is. The question, rather, is whether his own way of doing without intermediaries is part of a workable theory of truth.

The notion of an ontological gap existing between mind and world may tempt us into thinking that we need epistemic intermediaries to bridge it. This craving for objectivity only invites scepticism, which is why we have to affirm that the mind is in unmediated contact with the world. Rorty, Davidson and, following the latter, Marshall see this unmediated touch with the world as a causal relation between reality and our beliefs about it. We shall come back to this crucial notion of a causal relation between belief and world.

Marshall points out that the notion of form is an unworkable one since it only makes sense in a physical realm. It is not clear what this notion is supposed to do when applied to the immaterial realm of mind. However, if we drop form not much content is left to the idea of correspondence, as *iso-morph*-ism between reality and thought.

This is both a debate over the best interpretation of Aquinas, as well as about whether one *should* be a Thomist with respect to correspondence realism. Marshall thinks that in order to follow the spirit of Thomas's work on truth, one has to depart from the letter of his correspondence talk. However, Fergus Kerr thinks the letter is still important, and for a reason most relevant to our debate. He suggests, without much elaboration, that "a certain ontological mind/reality isomorphism may after all be implied in the Christian doctrine of creation."⁷ Kerr reminds Marshall that one should take account of Thomas's participationist metaphysics which involves another sense of truth, more fundamental than the other senses: truth as borne by forms and by sentences. Things are true, according to Kerr's reading of Aquinas, according to their *adequatio* with the divine intellect, insofar as they fulfill what was ordained for them

6. Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 8–9.

7. Fergus Kerr, "Book Symposium: Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*," *Modern Theology* 16.4 (Oct. 2000): 504.

by the divine intellect. What Kerr brings to the fore here is a sense in which, for the Christian, truth as a notion is incomprehensible apart from the being of God. This reveals the possibility of another kind of isomorphism, between the mind of God, or the divine intellect (which is also the being of God) and humans and their own minds. Such an isomorphism, about which more will have to be said on another occasion, involves the possibility of a correspondence not involving problematic intermediaries. Marshall is quite right to denounce the incoherence of the notion of an isomorphism between reality and mind. Yet the notion of a correspondence between two minds is less threatening. As Kerr comments on Aquinas:

He does not picture knowing as the subject's projecting value and intelligibility upon raw data. Rather, we exist at all only by participation in being (the doctrine of creation), and, since minds are what we are, we participate by exercising our intellectual capacities, and of course to a very limited extent, in God's own knowledge of the world.⁸

Marshall connects correspondence to the notion of form, as it is implied in the idea of an isomorphism between mind and world. Even aside from the arguments above, he has another reason to abandon correspondence: the notion is arguably vacuous. The objection may be summarized as follows: if a true sentence can be said to correspond to anything, it corresponds to the whole of reality. Correspondence as a notion does not tell us how to match pieces of our language with parts of the world. It follows that it is not so much false, as it is empty, or useless.

Not only is correspondence useless, but it also threatens to make truth inaccessible. This fear of inaccessibility prompted non-realists such as Dummett, but also realists like Putnam, to epitomize truth. Truth becomes warranted assertability, sometimes prefixed by 'idealized.' The problem is, of course, that

"Idealized warranted assertability" seems at least as remote and inaccessible a measure of truth as the "correspondence to reality" which, on account of inaccessibility, it was supposed to replace. Easing this problem by tying truth to current rather than ideal epistemic practices brings out the difference rather than the identity of truth and justification, since justification admits of degrees and can be lost, while truth, as anti-realists themselves generally concede, does neither [...]⁹

Marshall is just as unsatisfied by realist as he is by anti-realist attempts to distill the essence of truth. Both end up reducing truth to some other putatively more basic concept.

⁸ Ibid., 507f.

⁹ Marshall, *Trinity*, 225.

Realists and anti-realists alike appear to assume that “truth” is an especially obscure and elusive notion, for which conceptual equivalents need to be found which we can more readily grasp. But Davidson in particular has suggested that this assumption has the matter backwards, as the problems had by both realists and anti-realists in coming up with an informative and plausible substitute for “true” in part attest. Far from being a daunting puzzle, truth is about as basic and obvious a concept as we have. The notion of truth is much more clear to us—we have a much firmer grip on it—than any concept we might use to analyze or explain it.¹⁰

In effect we are being asked to move beyond realism or anti-realism with respect to truth. The basicity of the notion of truth must be assumed. It is not entirely clear what this is supposed to mean for Marshall. The clearest scenario is that we should refrain as much as possible from giving conceptual substitutes for truth. But the problem was not that of finding such substitutes anyway, but of analyzing the content of the notion, which means breaking it into distinctive analyzable parts. Marshall seems to be suggesting that the notion of truth is simple, i.e., it is not composite. There is nothing to be said about truth to illuminate and indeed to further our already firm grasp of the notion. Which is not to say that there is nothing to be said about truth at all. But we should give up the hope of coming up with anything like an explanatory account. On the contrary, any such account already presupposes our existing notion. All other such accounts are already truth-functional, which makes them explanatorily useless.

What Marshall and Davidson are doing here may be best described in terms of a Rortyan change of vocabulary. All we need to know about truth is given by Tarski’s T-sentences of the form:

‘Grass is green’ if and only if grass is green.

Sentences of this type show how ‘is true’ works for particular sentences of a given language. Taken together, all T-sentences that may be constructed for a given language, by extension, define truth for that language. Deflationists, however, will say that T-sentences tell us everything there is to know about truth.¹¹ This implies that truth is not simply a basic notion, but a redundant or trivial one. While deflationism rightly stresses that T-sentences capture something quite basic of the essence of truth, it has trouble accounting for the unity of truth. It follows that Davidson has to account for both the unity of truth while neither trivializing nor giving conceptual definitions for truth. He does that by giving two broad generalizations concerning truth.

On the one hand, there are ties which bind truth to meaning and belief which are partly constitutive of the concept of truth. Truth as captured by T-sentences is not an epistemic notion.¹²

10. *Ibid.*, 233.

11. *Ibid.*, 235.

12. This is where Rorty massively dissents from Davidson.

whether the sentence on the left is true depends on both its meaning and its truth conditions actually obtaining, regardless of whether anyone is justified in asserting it. The constitutive relation between truth and belief shows in the fact that belief has to be on the whole veridical, given its relation to truth and meaning. This is Davidson's famous transcendental argument against skepticism. Furthermore, the notion of belief presupposes that of objective truth. Marshall concludes that

The ties of truth to meaning and belief help display the unity of truth, and so tell us more about truth than Tarski's schema by itself. [...] What unifies truth is the role it plays in enabling us to *interpret* other speakers, no matter what language they speak. A concept that plays this role must be the same concept for the speaker and the interpreter, and must therefore be a single concept for whatever languages they speak.¹³

It appears that Davidson and Marshall give disquotationalism an interpretation which while making truth accessible to belief nonetheless refuses to epitomize it. This seems to go in a realistic direction inasmuch as the second condition for a sentence being true has to do with the truth conditions specified on the right branch of a T-sentence.

This brings up the second generalization made by Davidson. He sometimes refers to the function of the sentence figuring on the right branch of a T-sentence as specifying an arrangement of the world. The temptation to offer such *informative generalizations* stems from the fact that on a holistic reading the right branch simply gives truth conditions. But this tells us little about truth itself. To shed more light on truth itself, it may be said that truth depends on what sentences mean and on how the world is arranged. Davidson does indeed risk upsetting sympathetic critics such as Rorty when he says that "What Convention T, and the trite sentences it declares true...reveal is that the truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged."¹⁴ Marshall rightly points out that such a description of the sentences on the right branch involves truth-functional operatives and therefore does not say more, but actually less about the notion of truth. We do not need to draft in a description in order to explain truth. It is truth which explains description, not conversely.

This tells against hanging too many explanatory hopes on these sorts of generalizations. They are helpful in telling us more about the concept of truth by illuminating some of the connections it has with meaning and belief. As Marshall puts it,

13. Marshall, *Trinity*, p. 238.

14. Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 309, also quoted in Marshall, *Trinity*, 239.

The problem with such notions lies in our readiness to ignore their explanatory limitations, not in the thought that language is tied to the world. It is truth that ties language to the world, in the fashion displayed by each T-sentence. The difficulty we have in finding notions which allow us to generalize effectively about this tie need not suggest that the tie is puzzling or mysterious, still less that it is absent. Our conceptual frustration attests rather to the utterly basic way in which the concept of truth captures this tie.¹⁵

Marshall proposes to follow Davidson and Rorty (to a lesser extent) beyond the distinction between realism and anti-realism. What all these thinkers find so repugnant is the idea of an intermediary set up between mind and world. Such epistemic intermediaries do more harm than they do good. Their very existence is dubious in the first place; how best to describe them is also unclear. Perhaps more importantly, their epistemic utility is hard to see, since they merely shift the debate to another, more obscure and less accessible domain. It follows that we ought to give up the notion of correspondence, except when it is taken rather metaphorically as suggesting that truth is non-epistemic, and that our best justifications still do not ensure truth.¹⁶ However, such an employment of correspondence is only the expression of the hope that our thought brushes against the world and that our beliefs stand under its judgment. It, however, does nothing to say how we might best justify our beliefs. Correspondence does not figure in the order of justification anymore than coherence does in the order of truth.

II

Despite these severe restrictions on correspondence, it is still strongly suggested that thought is in touch with the world. However, that relationship is causal. My contention, which I hope to make persuasive later on, is that such a causal relationship, given that it is not itself accessible to reason, being as it were outside logical space, is just as mysterious as old correspondence, inviting yet another variety of scepticism. A merely causal relationship between experience and one's body of beliefs is not enough to ensure friction, of the important, epistemic type, between mind and world.

More on that will follow. Marshall does not leave a Davidsonian account of truth theologically unmodified. He does consider such an account to be "the most plausible outcome currently available of the long philosophical debate about what truth is."¹⁷ How does the Davidson-Tarski account of truth fare under theological scrutiny?

15. Marshall, *Trinity*, 241.

16. D. Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," in R. Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 66.

17. Marshall, *Trinity*, 241.

The first observation to be made is that for the Christians, Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14.6) and so is the Holy Spirit (1 John 5.6). It appears that truth attaches not only to sentences, and possibly forms, but also to a person. Starting from this observation flows the entire theological modification of the concept of truth. It soon becomes apparent that the shift in the content of the concept of truth which Marshall outlines also reflects negatively against realism, as traditionally conceived. Although Marshall lost all interest in realism for philosophical reasons, it is apparent that his theological reasons would have lead him in the same direction.

At first blush the Tarski-Davidson account of truth for sentences should have no trouble accounting for the truth of

- (1) “Jesus is risen” is true if and only if Jesus is risen.

Surely, Marshall argues, Christians would have no trouble assenting to such a sentence. The person who assents to such a sentence would be having a true belief, while the one who doesn't would be holding a false one. However, he goes on to say, we do not learn anything from this sentence about how truth might be borne by a person. In other words, using T-sentences for the purposes of theological assertions only exemplifies how ‘is true’ works when truth is born by sentences, not when truth is borne by a person. Unless we are prepared to employ two very different notions of truth, one for a theological context, one for a mundane, common-sense one, we should be able to find a coherent way to state that the two accounts are not “utterly disparate”¹⁸ At stake here is the very unity of truth, which as we already saw, is an intuition that must be preserved at all costs.

Why is a Tarski-Davidson characterization of the *content of the concept of truth* incomplete and “how may it be expanded theologically without losing an intelligible tie to the characterization Tarski and Davidson give”?

The main problem has to do with the fact that the truth of “Jesus is risen” is, as Marshall perhaps misleadingly calls it, automatic.¹⁹ In that case, the sufficient conditions for the truth of the sentence “Jesus is risen” are what a person means by those words and whether in fact Jesus was risen. The truth of the belief, like the truth of the sentence, would be automatic. There are two considerations which, when taken together, suggest that the truth of that sentence or belief cannot be automatic.

First, Marshall rightly points out that having a relationship to Jesus depends on having true beliefs about him, beliefs which correctly identify him. He is quite right to emphasize this aspect especially considering the current anti-cognitive trend in thinking about theological method. Secondly, “Any relations which created reality has to Jesus depend as a whole on Jesus himself.”²⁰

18. Ibid., 245.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 246.

This comes out perhaps most clearly in the way the New Testament characterizes Jesus' resurrection. The Father raises Jesus by his own free and sovereign action, which is to bestow his spirit upon the slain Jesus. This gift to the crucified Jesus fully enacts the Spirit's mission, begun at Jesus' baptism, to abide in and on the Son. The Spirit gives the dead Jesus the divine freedom to rise from the dead, by including Jesus once again in an ordered but mutual bond of being, knowledge and love with the Father. Jesus rises, therefore, in the utterly sovereign, self-determining freedom of God. [...] *The risen Jesus is not passive or inert, and therefore not at the disposal of human beings, or of anything created—except, of course, insofar as he freely gives himself to them Jesus' being at their disposal, one could say, is not itself at their disposal, but only at his own. Upon his own action, therefore, depends any relation to him which creatures may come to have.*²¹

Marshall is expressing here a classic Christian conviction in the purely accidental and loving nature of the relationship between God and mankind. There is nothing which forces God into being at our disposal. This relationship is entirely at his own disposal.

There is nothing problematic, at least in my view, about these two considerations, when taken separately. But Marshall suggests that when taken together, they suggest that the truth of the belief cannot be automatic. The very content of the belief entails that any relationship which we have with Jesus depends as a whole on his own free will and action. So far so good. But since our relationship to Jesus depends on our having true beliefs about him, it means that the very truth of those beliefs themselves cannot be automatic, but is itself at the disposal of Jesus. Our reading of Marshall, which is indeed not the only possible construal of his argument, is as follows.

All relations of created reality, including human minds, to Jesus depend as a whole on the action of Jesus himself.

From which it follows that:

Any element necessary for such a relation to obtain must depend in some way upon Jesus' action.²²

But

It is necessary that a person hold true beliefs (which identify Jesus) in order to have a relationship to Jesus.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 247.

Hence

The truth of the beliefs which identify Jesus are caused by Jesus himself.

It follows that for the truth of “Jesus is risen” it is necessary that Jesus acts upon the mind, which means for Marshall that he must bring it about that the sentence they hold is true. This is the specifically Christian theological modification of (at least a theological account of) truth. “In at least this specific respect,” writes Marshall, “Jesus is the truth.”

If these are the requirements of an account of truth applicable to sentences involving divine persons and their actions, it would appear that the unity of truth is in peril. Unless we are prepared to abandon this intuitive notion, we “should expect the truth-bestowing act of the triune God to unify all true beliefs.”²³ The biggest obstacle in the face of such unification is that, unlike sentences about God whose truth is evidently at the disposal of God, the truth of “Grass is green” is not at the disposal of grass itself. It seems that another way has to be found of unifying these two types of truths. Marshall’s suggestion is that once we recognize that all things have their origin in God the Father, then “In all creatures there lies at least a trace, a *vestigium*, of the Trinity, such that they both resemble and desire the Father.”²⁴ In contrast to Jesus the Son, who is the truth in that he perfectly bears the image of God the Father, created things resemble the Father in a more remote and partial way. But they still do. This is what licenses Marshall to propose that all truth conditions are wholly at the disposal of the Trinity. This is more obvious in Jesus’ case, since he is both the presenter of God (and therefore truth) and the presented (as divine revelation).

Yet that grass is green is as much presented to the world by the triune God as that Jesus is risen. The Father as much sees to it that the truth conditions for “grass is green” are met as that those for “Jesus is risen” are met. As Jesus Christ presents the truth conditions for the belief that he is risen to the world, in order that this belief may actually be true, so also he presents to the world all the truth conditions which the triune God wants to see met, and in this way brings about the truth of every true belief. And as the Spirit creates the conviction that “Jesus is risen” is true, so the Spirit may also be credited with creating the conviction that grass is green; any holding true of a sentence he brings about.²⁵

Thus the concept of truth is unified for all statements, regardless of what realities, divine or human, they are about. Or so it would seem. There is one exception to this overarching truth-bestowing act of the Trinity. It concerns sentences which, like “Florensky was murdered in the

23. *Ibid.*, 272.

24. *Ibid.*, 273.

25. *Ibid.*

Gulag” are true, yet whose truth is not willed by God. Marshall’s explanation for this apparent deviation from the norm is that

Because there is evil in the world traceable to the doings of created free agents, there will be some actual states of affairs which correspond to nothing in God, arrangements of the world for which there is nothing in God of which they are the likeness, even remotely.²⁶

In the following sections I shall discuss the coherence and felicity of Marshall’s arguments.

III

There is no doubt in my mind that Marshall’s vigorous defence of Christian theology is a most welcome presence on the theological scene of today. A not inessential explanation for his thoughtful arguments, precise reasoning and careful hermeneutics is his engagement with analytic philosophy. He has done this in such a way that few theologians would dare. His familiarity with Davidson and Quine might well have been that of a philosopher of mind, rather than a theologian who also has time to read Barth and Aquinas. The critique that we will offer here does not wish to take anything away from the courage of his project. Quite the contrary, I would like to recommend that such an encounter with analytic philosophy be given a more central space in discussions of theological method and epistemology. There are, however, several bones of contention. Dissatisfaction is caused partly by philosophical reasons and partly by theological ones.

There are two focal points of dispute, in our opinion. The first relates to what we shall call his *automaticity argument*. This is the argument that the truth of sentences like “Jesus is risen” cannot depend simply on what the sentence means and whether in fact he was also risen. There must be a further truth condition involved and that is that the Trinity must *cause* that belief to be true. The second point is one about the epistemic value of causality.

First, the automaticity argument. Premise (2) of his argument is correct, in the sense that, in order for human beings to have relations to God, it is necessary that God first act and make Himself available to our gaze. However, (3) is a logical *non sequitur*. It does not follow that any element necessary for such a relation to obtain must depend in some way on Jesus’ action. The only thing which results from (2) is

(3’) At least one of the necessary conditions for such a relation must depend in some way on Jesus’ action.

26. Ibid.

To understand why this is the case it must be remembered that Marshall intends to block the notion of creatures having relationships to their creator which are not dependent on the action of the creator. This is how Marshall translates disposability. God is not at the disposal of creatures, hence all relations we have to him must depend on his own free action. I have accepted this much. What has to be safeguarded is therefore the dependence of a given relationship to God. It is quite clear, however, that for such a dependence to obtain it is only *necessary* that *one* necessary condition of the relationship depend on God, not that *all* conditions depend on God. Dependence upon Jesus is real if it characterizes at least one necessary element of that relationship. Now one may imagine a relationship whose entire necessary constituents depended on the action of God. But such a relationship would not be any more dependent on God than one described by (3'). Dependence as a logical attribute does not allow gradation.

If things stand like this, it is not necessary that the truth of our identifying beliefs depend upon Jesus. It is, of course, possible, but it is not required by Marshall's argument so far. Let us imagine a set of necessary conditions for a relationship between human beings and God. First, a necessary condition of such a relationship might be that human beings correctly identify God.²⁷ Secondly, it is necessary that God be personally available to human beings, in some accessible form. Christians hold that he has revealed himself in the Scriptures and throughout history, but supremely in the person of Jesus, his Son. A third necessary condition is that human beings be capable of relationship to a divine being. The list could be plausibly extended, but this is enough to show that if at least one of these conditions is entirely at the disposal of God, then the whole relation would be utterly dependent upon God.

Marshall does have what he thinks is a stronger argument for his claim and it is a specifically Trinitarian one. After offering what is a very weak philosophical argument²⁸ against the claim that it is only the holding of the belief which may need to be caused by the Trinity and not the truth of the belief, he turns to the distinctive roles of the Trinitarian persons in each divine action. He points out that:

Were responsibility for creating the *attitude* of believing sufficient to characterize Jesus' own action in bringing about the true belief that he is risen, there would be no distinction between Jesus' role in the one divine action of bringing about this true belief and the role of the Spirit in that action.²⁹

27. There is, of course, a sense in which such a condition need not obtain. I might as well have challenged this part of Marshall's argument. For example, the disciples on the way to Emmaus had a relationship to the resurrected Jesus without being able to correctly identify him. Moses at the burning bush has a relationship to God, although he is not at first aware of it.

28. Marshall, *Trinity*, 248.

29. *Ibid.*, 249.

While Marshall is right to insist on the distinctiveness of each divine person's involvement with creation, it is not conclusive that "*Opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*" entails that in each particular action, each divine person must have a clearly recognizable role. This would appear to throw us into an infinite circularity whereby each divine person is involved in each other's actions. Marshall is right to insist that the work of the Son must be distinguished from that of the Spirit. But if we were to apply his reasoning here, we would have to say that, if the Spirit creates the attitude of belief, and if all the economical activity of the Trinity is one, then both Jesus and the Father need to be involved in that *specific* action too. That is, if one reads *divine unity in action* like that. Some schematization might better help us understand the difficulty. Say the Holy Spirit is engaged in action A. According to this interpretation, each divine person must have a clearly distinguishable part in that action. Let us call those separate 'sub-actions' A₁, A₂ and A₃. But then if A₁ is an action of the Father, it must also be the case that all the other persons must have a clearly isolatable part in A₁ too. We might call these A₁₁, A₁₂, and A₁₃. We could go on like this up to the point where it becomes very difficult to speak about distinguishable roles, to say nothing about an appropriate basis upon which one could differentiate between the respective actions. This would seem to throw us into an ineffable vortex of divine entanglements. Some may rightly point out that this is but the divine mystery of *perichoresis*. But if that is so, then we are not sure much epistemic use can be made of it. The reality of divine perichoresis is an important insight, but precisely because it is such a mystery, it cannot have a pivotal role in any argument which tries to isolate economic roles for the divine persons. We might then say that divine perichoresis is true but vacuous, or, more 'optimistically,' true without being terribly helpful. It functions as a rule, stating that whenever one speaks about one divine person, one also speaks, by perichoretic implication, about the whole of the Godhead.

So far I have attempted to cast doubt on Marshall's argument that the truth of sentences like (1) cannot be automatic. His suggestion initially appeared to grant religious truth a qualitatively different status compared to what truth is in what Pickstock calls "the busy commerce of everyday where disquotationalism exerts its minimalist rule."³⁰ Such a distinction would have disrupted the very unity of truth, an intuition which Marshall is keen to preserve. But we have seen how Marshall extends this theological modification of the content of the concept of truth³¹ to cover truth as applied to everyday life sentences like "Grass is green." The effect of this move has been to remove the sting from his theological modification of truth. It is not simply the truth of theological sentences which cannot be automatic, but the truth of all sentences depends on God's action in some way.

Two points need bearing out. First, applying the theological modification of truth across the board risks ascribing evil to God. Marshall is aware of this problem, but minimalizes its falsifying potential. He thinks that sentences like "Florensky was murdered in the Gulag" are true, but God is

30. John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

31. Marshall, *Trinity*, 245.

not willing to meet their truth conditions, he does not want to cause them to be true. It follows that there is, after all, a domain where the Tarski-Davidson account of sentential truth is sufficient and where in fact no theological supplement of the concept is possible.³² For Marshall it is because of the existence of free agents and their entirely voluntary actions that there are such sentences. Here we seem to be presented with the problem of evil transferred to the issue of who makes sentences about evil true. The problem is acknowledged, but for some reason Marshall elects to retain it as an exception. I am not sure, however, that there is room for such exceptions. At stake is the very unity of truth. Besides, the number of such sentences is unfortunately not insignificant.

Marshall seems to be caught between the two extreme options. He can deny the unity of truth and risk elevating theological truth over and above mundane truth. But then, he need not have attempted to apply the theological correction even to “Grass is green.” If the damage has already been done, in the form of sentences about evil, why bother with the rest? On the other hand, he has the option of a sort of divine determinism, which I suspect has been subterraneously present throughout the argument of *Trinity and Truth*, and which has surfaced at places like: ‘all created things bear the image of God to some extent’ and ‘God makes true every true sentence.’

The problem can be solved by changing the criterion which applies the theological modification of truth to mundane things. Too much is hinged on vestigiality, such that God is made the author of evil. The solution is akin to Vico’s notion of the convertibility of the true with the made.³³ God makes certain sentences true because he creates events described by them, because he makes them. Vico would say that God has true *scientia* of a thing. In the same way, human knowledge is most accurate about those things in whose creation human beings played a large part, like literature, art, even history. This would then be the principle: an author, a creator, a maker, generally, knows *and makes* the truth of her own creations. Inasmuch as we have created certain things we ourselves are creating the truth conditions for sentences relating to those things. It follows that the truth of “Grass is green” is given by God, not because grass is a trace of God, however remote and imperfect, but because it is God who created grass and because it is God who made it to be green. But the truth of “Florensky was murdered in the Gulag” is not created by God, but by whoever murdered Florensky in the Gulag. There will be no need to look for traces of God in true statements. There is still something to be said about the “truth of things” inasmuch as they conform to the being of God, that is to what God has ordained for them, but that is a separate, albeit important issue.

32. *Ibid.*, 274.

33. For an illuminating account, see John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico 1668–1744* (Lewiston/Queenston Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1992), 78, 81, 84 (vol. 1), 9–11 (vol. 2); Robert Miner, *Vico: Genealogist of Modernity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), esp. pp. 26ff. Reflecting upon the relationship between truth (*verum*) and making (*facere*) leads one to the appropriate conclusion that realism makes no sense apart from the thought of some Maker knowing truths about reality. For this point, see A. Plantinga, “How to be an Anti-Realist?” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (Sept. 1982): 67ff.

IV

So much for the automaticity argument. I hope to have shown that it is an unnecessary modification of the concept of truth. The second main thrust of our critique concerns the notion of causality. Marshall inherits a certain reservation about causality from Quinean and Davidsonian holism. It is helpful briefly to rehearse them.

Davidson's famous critique of the third dogma of empiricism is directed at what he diagnoses as Quine's inability to have it both ways: to still speak of a tribunal of experience which judges our beliefs and at the same time conceive experience as being outside the space of reasons. One cannot coherently speak of content as something *given* in sensorial experience awaiting organization by a conceptual scheme. The reason for this, Davidson suggests, is that Quine has not fully developed the implications flowing from the distinction between the two logical spaces, a space of causality and one of reason, or freedom. This distinction is part of a venerable tradition in analytic philosophy, stemming from Sellars, but it can also be traced as far back as Hegel. It turns on the qualitative distinction between nature, as a realm of causality and brute force, and mind, as the space of freedom and choice. It is the old problem of a gap between mind and world. Platonism tries to bridge the gap by imagining the presence in the mind of certain forms which somehow mysteriously originate in nature. Naturalism, on the other hand, imagines a complete reduction of the mental to the physical.

Davidson rightly points out that Quine, although being aware of the distinction, attempts to bridge the gap in an inefficient, some might say even irresponsible manner, by way of intermediaries. Speaking of sense data as intermediaries between mind and world, however, has the effect of pushing the two farther apart. Since, for Quine, sense data translates the impact upon our nerve endings of whatever goes on outside our skins, they are in the causal realm. But as causes, they cannot deliver reasons. If we are to speak in terms of the Kantian theory of perception, such sense data are parts of receptivity rather than spontaneity. But this is precisely what makes the Myth of the Given attractive, as Davidson realizes: hoping that we can find a point at which to anchor our spontaneity and make it responsible before the world. The problem is that in Davidson's opinion, we cannot swear intermediaries to truth. We cannot know whether they are misleading us or not. Furthermore, it is not these putative intermediaries which do the job of justifying, but our beliefs about them. It is not the fact that I *see* that grass is green which justifies my belief that it is. It is rather the fact that I believe that I see grass to be green. Davidson's solution is therefore a coherentism whose maxim is that only beliefs justify beliefs. Something which is not in the space of reasons cannot justify any belief.

But this creates a problem for holism. It is in fact one of the defining marks of holism, and it is surprising to see that Marshall does not consider it that problematic. If it is only beliefs which justify beliefs, and if experience impacts our web of beliefs only indirectly, then we

cannot possibly know which *particular* beliefs are true and which aren't. How then can we say that we have bridged the gap between mind and world, if we are not able to do so for particular sentences? The typical Davidsonian answer invokes a transcendental argument in saying that we can only know that *most* of our beliefs are true. But we can never say with certainty *which* are. The upshot of holism, therefore, is that it has created the conditions for another type of globalized skepticism. So what if we are in unmediated touch with the world if we are not able to tell at which particular point this touch has any epistemic value? Pickstock's comment on Davidson gives voice to the fear of relativism enshrined here:

He remains, therefore, with an unsustainable dualism which must collapse either into a thoroughgoing physicalism, which would hand the determination of truth entirely over to natural science, or else into a species-relativism in such a way that the one 'coherence' we are locked into, perhaps discloses nothing whatsoever concerning the world and is itself radically inexplicable.³⁴

If this creates a problem for the philosophical quest about truth, it will certainly create a problem for a theological reconstruction of this quest, like that attempted by Marshall. To get straight to the point: what is the cash value of saying that Jesus causes certain sentences to be true, if one has already excluded 'causes' from the space of reasons? Can Jesus' action be anything other than a barely visible trace, perhaps not even this much? More puzzles follow: how are we to know which are those beliefs *caused* by him, if we censor causality like this? The only point at which Marshall mentions he is aware of the problem is in the final pages of the volume:

But we need not always be able to tell which beliefs God makes true; it suffices that we can tell for the most part, and especially with regard to those beliefs which are epistemically primary. There need be no guarantee that a justified belief is true (there hardly could be, since in some cases people are justified in holding incompatible beliefs), only that justified beliefs are true on the whole.³⁵

It is hard to see why Marshall is so optimistic with regards to those epistemically central beliefs. If it is the community which decides which beliefs are epistemically central, there is no reason why we could not expect our community to revise those beliefs. It cannot be the case, according to Marshall's coherentism, that the community has recognised those central beliefs as originating in the teachings of Jesus, or in the Scriptural narratives, or in divine revelation, or what have you. That would merely cast us back into the Myth of the Given, which is something we

34. Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 2f.

35. Marshall, *Trinity*, 278.

should of course be afraid of. This very much looks like blind faith, in the sense that we can only hope that our best and most cherished beliefs are true.

Even the accessibility of truth to belief, which Marshall beautifully ties to the work of the Spirit, is compromised here. What he gives with one hand, in speaking theologically about the Spirit's leading us into all truth, he takes with the other, in imposing restrictions upon causality. There is no way of knowing which beliefs are those which the Spirit *causes* us to have, since this very work of the Spirit is inaccessible to our reason. Pickstock's pessimistic forecast seems warranted: either Davidson allows some epistemic value to causality, or he risks naturalism, on the one hand, and relativism, on the other.

Marshall closely follows Davidsonian holism. But while he does modify it to fit a theological account of truth, he does not reform the latter's conservatism with respect to causality. Perhaps this much is also required by a theological account of truth.³⁶

We will linger on some related issues, before concluding. Marshall follows Rorty in thinking that philosophy has been obsessively preoccupied with finding bits of the given on which to build philosophical arguments. All holist thinkers agree that this has proven a dead end. What is not already in the space of reason cannot give any sort of justification to anything. Worse, philosophy has only managed, in feeding this craving for objectivity, to further remove itself from the world. The task now appears to be that of reinstating an unmediated link with the world. While there is a lot of promise in the Davidsonian project, the issues outlined above suggest that some serious critique is also called for before one could put it to fruitful theological use. One of the reasons for this is that the world remains decidedly out of epistemic touch and that it only approximates what Rorty describes as "those planks in the boat which are at the moment not being moved about."³⁷

In Marshall's opinion, Thomas' way of speaking of truth is unsatisfactory. He sometimes speaks about truth as being borne by sentences, sometimes as being brought about by forms—"when they come to exist in the intellect by passing through different media which link the intellect to the world." This latter view is the problem for Marshall. While it appears that Thomas invokes intermediaries, this is not really the case, for he is a direct realist. Yet it is his own way of doing without intermediaries which upsets Marshall.³⁸ The notion of form is suspicious, for it presupposes so much of the defunct aspects of Aristotelian metaphysics, that it is no longer comprehensible today.

36. This is not the place for such an analysis, but a conceivable argument might start from both the biblical notion that 'Jesus is the truth' and the notion that 'the Spirit will lead you into all truth.' While the first one forces a modification of the Tarski-Davidson account of truth conditions, the latter challenges Davidsonian holism, or at least aspects of it.

37. Rorty, "The World Well Lost," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 15.

38. Marshall, *Trinity*, 218.

39. Bruce D. Marshall, "Theology After Cana," part of "Book Symposium: Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*,"

The problem with calling on substantial and accidental forms in an account of truth is that there is no need, and no convincing evidence, to believe there are such things.⁴⁰

If not much sense can be made of the notion, than neither can much sense be made of the notion of correspondence of mind to reality, which rests on that of form.

The thought of the mind corresponding to reality draws much of its intelligibility from a use of “form” which is, in itself, entirely lucid: one physical object impresses its shape upon another, thus making the other correspond to it (the ring and the wax). Intelligibility tends to fade as we extend this idea into the realm of the immaterial: for Thomas neither the mind nor the intelligible species, being without matter, can have a shape, yet the one is “formed” by the other. If, as it seems we must, we drop Aristotelian forms altogether (and with that the attempted extension), not much seems left of the idea of one thing corresponding to another. How can we have isomorphism with no *morphe*?⁴¹

We have already pointed out that Marshall does away with correspondence as a workable theory of truth. It fails to provide us with two things we can compare to one another.⁴² But the main point of the critique is that we actually understand truth better than we understand correspondence, or any other explanatory notion for that matter. How then, is the link between mind and world (re)established? Davidson argues that it is truth that ties mind to the world. However, if Pickstock is right, it is possible that all we are left with is a coherent system of beliefs, with no particular links, not even causal, to reality. That is an entirely logical possibility. John McDowell castigates Davidson’s unconstrained coherentism, voicing a thought similar to Pickstock’s: if there is nothing from experience that might rationally figure in our system of beliefs as sources of justification, then we have not really reinstated any link with the world. Hilary Putnam voices a similar concern, this time pertaining to realism: it is not enough to make realist-sounding statements.⁴³ Both Rorty (of all people!) and Davidson make such statements. Both speak in terms of being in touch with the world. But all that talk simply translates into an expression of *hope* that it is the world which generates most of our beliefs. Yet it is precisely this fear which made the myth of the given attractive in the first place. Davidson’s solution does not alleviate the fear, but only transfers it to another level. Like it or not, a dualism is being reinstated

521.

40. Marshall, “Cana,” 522.

41. *Ibid.*, 522f.

42. See Marshall’s slingshot argument, *Trinity and Truth*, 227–233.

43. Putnam, “Meaning Holism,” in *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); H.

between the mind—as the logical space of reasons—and the world—as the natural realm of causality. Davidson’s position is the typically modern strategy of crossing a divide: firmly setting camp on one side of the gap, gathering all the resources available on that side of the gap, and finally bridging the gap from one side.⁴⁴ This inevitably involves a revisionism, a reconstruction of the world which hardly resembles what is normally considered to fit the description. Rorty’s metaphor of currently stationary planks seems to capture well the implications of holism.

Davidson thinks his position is saved by invoking the transcendental argument that the ties which hold between meaning, belief and truth ensure that most of our beliefs are true most of the time. Yet McDowell’s criticism is straight to the point: if experience does not even figure in the space of reasons, than our beliefs will have no empirical content. Nothing will be left of the notion of a body of beliefs,⁴⁵ if such beliefs have no content. The same point is astutely made by Putnam: if we drop intentionality, we have to drop thought as well.⁴⁶ The route by which McDowell arrives at his conclusion is a long and complex one and we cannot rehearse it here. It rests on a possibility that Davidson does not even consider, which is that there can be a cooperation of receptivity and spontaneity, such that the latter is always already passively drawn into operations of the former. It then follows that experience can serve as a tribunal for our beliefs, because it is already conceptual. This cooperation results in the fact that “the structure of elements that constitutes a thought, and the structure of elements that constitutes something that is the case, can be the very same thing.”⁴⁷ However, as John Haldane has observed, this is “as close as makes no substantial difference to the old orthodoxy of Thomist metaphysical realism.”⁴⁸

Unless Marshall offers a better alternative to Thomas’ understanding of truth, he might as well be less dismissive of the latter’s employment of the notion of forms. Kerr and Pickstock helpfully underscore that Thomas should not be pressed into an epistemological, post-Fregean mold, but one should keep in mind that for him epistemology (knowledge) belongs together with ontology (being), but more importantly with theology (God). Thus, the ‘theory’ of correspondence was never intended to stand independently of the doctrine of God who creates out of nothing and in whose being humans creatively participate. Thus, Pickstock speaks of knowledge as “God’s perpetual return to himself.”⁴⁹ Marshall’s suspicion of the given, of intermediaries, causes him to revolt against Thomas’ notion of form itself. Unfortunately, the holist alternative only perpetuates the dualism between nature and reason.

Putnam, “Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. R. Brandom, 83.

44. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 94.

45. R. Brandom, ed 17, 18, 68.

46. Putnam, “Why is a Philosopher?” *Realism With a Human Face*, 114.

47. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 27.

48. Quoted by Kerr, “Symposium,” 506. Cf. John Haldane, “A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind,” *Mind (new series)* 11,3 (1998): 253–277; F. Kerr, “Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies?” *Modern Theology* 20,1 (2004): 123–139.

V

It is now time to recapitulate the argument of this article. I have expressed two main objections to Marshall's proposal regarding a theory of truth. There are also other points of disagreement, but they are traceable to these two. First, Marshall's argument against automaticity is unconvincing. His argument from the distinctive roles of the divine persons is flawed in that it invites an infinite regress in role-attribution. This only shows that while the concept of 'perichoresis' captures something of the divine life, it cannot be put to much epistemic use, as Marshall hopes. Marshall is aware that his argument risks attributing evil to God. He therefore introduces an exception to his rule, namely that the truth of those sentences about evil need not be caused by God, but may be attributed to the action of free agents. But this means that he has denied the unity of truth. I suggested that the problem can be solved by changing the criterion which applies the theological modification of truth to mundane things.

The second objection concerns his notion of causality. We hold that his imported Davidsonian holism, with its strictures on causality and its distinction between the logical space of reasons and the causal realm of nature renders his theological use of divine causality useless. The point acquires extra significance in light of Marshall's distinction between epistemically primary and epistemically secondary beliefs. He takes the primary ones to be those directly caused by the Trinity. However, holism prevents us from isolating beliefs from one another like that. All that we have is—given the best scenario—a transcendental argument that allows us to hope that most of our beliefs are true. It seems that at the very point of the distinctiveness of Christian faith, where one is used to speak about revelation, faith, and so on, one is denied the epistemic import of these by holism.

There are also other associated difficulties. More importantly, the claim to have moved beyond realism and antirealism still leaves us with important questions about how thought relates to reality. It is not enough to simply hope that the causal interaction at the level of nerve endings will produce viable epistemic results in the logical space of reasons. McDowell is right to fear that our thought may have no empirical content if we ban experience from the space of reasons.